The Choctaw Story

Exploring and recording the storytelling tradition on film

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Contents

Note: The documentary film “From the water to the woods” should be played as the accompaniment to the report that follows. It can be found at the following link: https://vimeo.com/217215736

Abstract

Author: Logan Crossley
Title: The Choctaw Story: Exploring and recording the storytelling tradition on film
Supervising Professor: Dr. Patricia Galloway

This thesis contains two parts, a short documentary film and a written report, which taken together celebrate and comment upon the Choctaw oral storytelling tradition. The project as a whole serves as an introduction to the topic and allows Choctaws themselves to inform the audience about their thoughts and perspectives regarding identity, heritage, media representation, and the future of the tribe. The interviews that form the backbone of the documentary film greatly enlighten upon research findings that extend from a literature review, and so the thesis takes the form of a personal ethnography focusing on a specific aspect of culture.

Salient themes include the defining characteristics of "a Choctaw story," the inter-generational movement of the storytelling art, the place that Native Americans broadly and Choctaws specifically occupy in modern American society, and the role that new media may play in the survival and dissemination of the oral storytelling form into the future. Film looks to be an important element of this ongoing interaction between traditional forms and emergent ones, and so the piece at the heart of this thesis is a commentary in and of itself about the awesome potential and inherent limitations of recording stories that have always existed purely in the oral tradition.

Finally, the question of authorship arises naturally when the production of a creative work involves academic research, the collection of sometimes-personal stories, and the use of pre-existing works that have no acknowledged "author" in the conventional use of the word. The product that results from this study cannot be attributed to a single storyteller or researcher, which differentiates it from most creative theses. This thesis is a collaboration in the deepest sense of the word; it therefore honors the roots and spirit of both the oral tradition and the craft of filmmaking, neither of which can be accomplished alone, but instead require person-to-person contact, willingness to listen, and respect for the stories that every person carries with them.

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Dedication

The roots of this project are my family's roots. I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma through my mother and further through my grandmother, whom I credit with establishing my initial interest in answering these questions. It has been thanks to her that I have come to recognize the depth of the problem of invisibility and the difference that combatting it can make in one's personal understanding of identity and heritage. My sincere hope in pursuing this project has always been to better appreciate where I come from, and if this work can help other Choctaws, whether they are first language speakers in Mississippi or high school kids in suburban Dallas or women like my grandmother in Oklahoma, come closer to their people, then I will consider it a success. Chahta sia hoke.

Part I: The set up

My elevator ride to the Anthropology floor in search of a thesis adviser marked the first time I ever stepped foot in the department. This is an example of an incorrect approach. The official recommendation from the Plan II Honors Program regarding a thesis adviser is to stay close to home. Perhaps you've had an interesting class with an interesting professor. Ask them. Perhaps you know of a researcher on campus whose work intersects with your proposed area of study. Bingo. Most advisers are professors-of-yore, though it is not unheard of to seek out someone you've never met who fits the bill. However, something that is exceptionally rare, to my knowledge, is choosing an adviser who specializes in a subject you know basically nothing about. As a Plan II and Radio/Television/Film major, Native American studies belonged to that category for me.

Like someone on-hold on a customer service call, I was sent in different directions by all the people I talked to, until I walked into an office on the fifth floor of the creatively named "University Administration Building" and met Dr. Patricia Galloway. Here across for me was someone who fit several descriptions that I was seeking: 1) she had expertise in Choctaw history and the ability to guide me in pursuit of more information about such, 2) she had spent a career thinking, writing, and teaching about archiving cultural artifacts, and 3) she was willing to take on an undergraduate thesis student with no background whatsoever in the above two points.

I explained to Dr. Galloway that I would be making a documentary film about Choctaw storytelling. The documentary part I felt alright about; I have been studying

filmmaking, and the documentary form in particular, for the better part of the last few years. But I was going to tremendously need her help with the "Choctaw" part. When I found a second reader in Dr. Circe Sturm, whose career in academia has spanned across every section of my project's Venn Diagram of topics, and who, as someone with Mississippi Choctaw heritage and film experience, wound up being perfectly suited for this work, the team had been assembled. I was feeling less like a castaway who doesn't know how to swim and more like the first mate to a crew with very impressive leadership.

I started with books, then moved to cameras, and then finally to computers and projectors. This report is an account of what happened along the way, meant as a guide and accompaniment to the documentary film, *From the water to the woods*, that I produced as the centerpiece of the thesis. Taken together, they mark the output of my work from July 2016 to May of the next year. This is *The Choctaw Story*.

Background

The Choctaw people will serve as the focal point of the discussion. Where necessary I will distinguish between the various intra-tribal groups: the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians. The Trail of Tears represents the critical and defining disruption in the collective memory of the Choctaw people and the other groups of displaced Southeastern tribes, and the vestiges of this great human catastrophe survive today in the geography of the decentralized tribe. Only recently – in the last two decades or so –

have there been made organized efforts to reconnect the various groups, usually for the celebration of shared cultural traditions. In small ways, the gap in distance and time has allowed a process of differentiation to play out. For example, the hymns sung by Mississippi Choctaws are both musically and lyrically distinct from those sung by Oklahoma Choctaws. Generally speaking, there exists a sense among all the peoples that the Mississippi Choctaws remain the stewards of "the old ways." However, despite geographic and temporal isolation going on 150 years, these groups speak the same language, they abide by the same customs, they are one people. I considered, when narrowing the scope of this project, conducting an extensive comparative analysis of the different subgroupings of the Choctaw peoples; as I began to research, it quickly became apparent to me, in light of the celebratory and personal nature of my work, that it would reflect more positively and more accurately on the Choctaw to honor the shared parts of their heritage.

This is particularly underscored because my project focuses on storytelling. The trove of Choctaw traditional stories, being as it is a cultural artifact in itself, preserves and perpetuates the essence of Choctaw identity. Like the Chahta language and the game of stickball, these folktales live on in the collective memory of the people and represent both acknowledgment of the past and opportunities for present-day engagement. Two edited collections of stories, *Walking the Choctaw Road* and *Choctaw Tales*, have been consulted extensively for this project, and although Oklahoma and Mississippi Choctaws have compiled them respectively, their considerable overlap

speaks to the phenomenon of storytelling-as-institution. Here I would like to define what exactly it is that I am referring to when I reference "Choctaw stories."

Choctaw people tell stories, which aligns them with all cultures that have ever existed. What makes stories significant and worthy of study is their position within a culture as a type of augmented communication, or "privileged language," with a purpose to instruct or entertain. A story could be couched within a natural, free-flowing conversation between two people, and they would mutually agree upon and understand where the story begins and where it ends. It is therefore separate from the kind of off-the-cuff remarks made in everyday language, and even if it is told – as it is by Choctaw people – without having been written down, and therefore necessarily without a permanently defined set of words, it nonetheless follows a collectively acknowledged structure, which is fluid in the long-term but consistent in the short-term.

The long tradition of the European folktale perhaps defines more rigidly what a story is and can be, in part because that is true of stories from that part of the world, and also thanks to considerable work, from scholars like Propp, Aarne, and Thompson, who sought to unlock the basic tropes undergirding all stories (note that they did not specify "European stories," though these made up the vast majority of their reference pool). It can be tempting, and has sometimes been accepted practice, to lay these theoretical models on top of non-Western stories. But after even the briefest introduction to this field of study, I have come to recognize the hazards of this type of approach. I will thus avoid making my definition of "story" overly narrow; not all Choctaw stories have a clear "protagonist," a narrative that unfolds in three parts, or a strict order of appearance for

their archetypes (all elements of the theories of the aforementioned scholars). When defining "stories" in my research, I will simply stick with the "privileged language" definition and keep that privileging power in the hands of those who carry on the Choctaw tradition. This may seem like circular reasoning or defining a term by using that same term in the definition. However I think it is appropriate and useful to keep this idea central in this work. As someone who has been unavoidably influenced by one culture's system of categorizing and sorting, I want to resist the urge to apply this to the cultural content of another people. What is hard to acknowledge is that academic norms are necessarily the products of culture in the first place, and therefore cannot always apply universally as the objective and exhaustive nature of their language would suggest. In sum: a Choctaw story is such because the Choctaw deem it to be.

With the term "story" now distinguished from non-story language, I turn to the other half of the phrase "Choctaw story," if only to offer a clarification. A Choctaw story is not simply a story told by a Choctaw person, or a story told in the Chahta language. A Choctaw story is a story that *belongs* to the Choctaw people. The creation of these tales predates the emergence of the complex web of intellectual property law that has emerged in the last century, but even if those laws could be applied retroactively, it is impossible and misguided to attempt to attribute the origin of any story to a single source.

The question of authorship itself fundamentally fails as a framework for description in this case and also arguably misses the point. The timeline of art history in the Western canon has allowed "storytellers" across multiple media to become notable

figures that receive recognition and focus under the scholarly microscope. In every area of the fine arts, these transcendent artists wear the badge of the auteur, and, pre-New Criticism, it was generally acceptable to deeply associate their work with their personal biographies. Even in the present our society lauds a select few artists and examines their body of work as distinctly theirs, perhaps overestimating the degree to which it can be synthesized as a whole and mined for details that speak to the author's personal life and the time period in which they lived.

Oral tradition cannot be analyzed through this lens; it is a different kind of literature entirely, more a sociological-ethnohistorical artifact than a "short story" as we understand that generic term. If a story told in the oral tradition does in fact reflect its teller and the society from which it comes, it is for reasons different than those that make, for example, a story from *Dubliners* relevant to Joyce's life and Ireland in the early 20th century. Joyce, in his writing, blurs the line between narrative and commentary, but both strands are consciously present, and necessarily so; the deep interconnection between modern literature's creation and its academic study influences the author's workflow. The auteur tradition requires that every part of the story contain the creator's unique touch. In some sense, he is asked to preempt the analysis of his own text in his original creative efforts. 20th-century authors like Joyce debatably embody this phenomenon more than authors in other parts of the history of literature, however it is true that literature with any kind of lasting visibility has almost always come down to us by authors who are intimately familiar with the history of literature. Thus, as a field, literature is incredibly inward looking. With an ever-growing pile of careful

scholarship, including original sources, books about books, and books about books about books, we compile a collage that begins to look, in the big picture, like an accurate portrayal of things as they were. I want to posit that the nature of the oral tradition takes this kind of work, that of curating and averaging, out of the hands of academics, and gives it over to the people themselves. It is therefore a much better source for understanding a people as they wish to be understood. It is grassroots, organic scholarship.

As I seek to say something substantive about the ability of Choctaw stories to shine a light on the Choctaw people's history and culture, I feel immensely lucky to be able to look to a collection of the tribe's own words about itself. The Choctaw story "How the Turtle Shell Received Its Cracks," to use just one example, is not a comment on anything *per se*. But since this story was created without the goal of reflecting its society, it might in fact do so more purely.

That being said, I want to be very cautious about using terms like "pure" and "authentic," because they are the most dangerous descriptors in cultural studies. Whoever decides how "pure" something is or is not winds up being The Master of the Universe if that is the measure by which things are taken seriously. Moreover, Native Americans have a complex and often-painful history with the concept of "purity:" oppressive notions of "white purity" and blood quantum have held Native Americans back since initial colonial contact; internal questions of tribal membership have dovetailed with that exact question ("Who belongs?") in reverse; the toxic and inaccurate portrait of purity, the "Noble Savage," still influences the way Native

Americans and Native history are discussed by our society; and the sense that "real" Indians are people out-of-their-time, ghosts from the undefined past whose appearance in the present day is a marker of a primitive era, has hindered Native Americans' efforts to carve out a path for themselves that is both uniquely Native and also contemporary.

Taken collectively, Choctaw stories variously recount historical events, echo how that event has been dealt with by the tribe, espouse the dominant values of the people, represent the modes and vocabulary for "good" and "bad," "hero and villain," and impart lessons to younger generations of listeners. They reflect both an observable history and a speculative one, and thus provide incredible insight into the Choctaw sense of identity.

Ultimately, it is their fluidity that is their defining characteristic, their blessing and their curse. They hold generations and centuries of imprints, which can be unraveled and analyzed seemingly endlessly. But just as they evolve over time, so they run the risk of being subsumed by a wall of stories that grows all the time. Mass media and emergent modes of communication adhere to a completely different life cycle in creative and distribution processes. It will fall to this and the next few generations of Choctaws to decide how and how much the interaction between these two powerful storytelling forces will influence each of them.

Part II: The journey

Introduction

"Indians are humble." A short declarative. I heard this sentence from more than half of the people I interviewed for this project, always delivered in a similar way. At first it did not stand out from other analytical statements that are the bread and butter of interviews. These tend to be, at best, magnificent overgeneralizations, and at worst, undercooked and verifiably false conclusions. Coincidentally, I must admit they make great sound bites when editing a documentary film…

"Indians are humble." As with anything, repetition draws attention. By the fourth unique instance of the phrase, the faint feeling of déjà vu had become a noticeable trend: Indians say that "Indians are humble." I had a hard time distinguishing whether this phrase was a commentary about the way things are or a mantra about how they should be until I concluded that it was both at the same time. After hearing it from so many people, I've learned that it's a self-realizing claim, both descriptive and prescriptive at once. In a bigger picture sense, much of culture is this way, Native American or otherwise. Alongside food, dress, language, and the like, ideas are the bedrock of identity, and they are not observable, capital-T *Truths* about people and communities, but choices, social constructs.

"Indians are humble." How exactly does this pertain to my project? I set out looking for *storytellers*, initially operating with a very narrow definition of that word. Whether it was born from some amalgamation of media imagery – the old man around the fire, the bards of antiquity, the seamstresses and weavers and spinners of tales – I have a hard time now, reflecting on a process that has already unfolded, recalling what it was exactly that I had formed in my head about what would qualify as "a storyteller."

But when I asked around, there were none left. Literally none. One person, a man in his 80s now residing in Canyon Lake, Texas, proudly identified himself as a "Choctaw storyteller." He provided a starting point for me. But others I talked to immediately undercut him as impure, a sellout, a white man taking Indian stories and making them into watered-down versions that were too Indian for white people to appreciate and too white for Indians to recognize. So even he, under the right kind of microscope, failed the "storyteller" test.

Everyone else, I know now, was participating in a tried and true tradition of self-censure, one that I would be naïve to fault them for when considering the historical circumstances that have completely smothered and invalidated their culture. But it's not even a case of "Choctaw shame," conscious or unconscious, that prevented this tradition from surviving the evolutionary bottleneck that is the past two hundred or so years of contact with the United States. What it really comes down to, by my estimation, is that characteristic humility.

There exists an undeniable semantical difference between the sentences "I tell stories" and "I am a storyteller." The first is action-based. Anyone, properly equipped and willing, can tell a story. If they use language to form narrative and then share that narrative with someone else or put it down on a page or create a film, they are participating in the "telling of stories." But to be a storyteller is to assume a new identity. Telling stories is something *to do*; a storyteller is something *to be*.

What I found, over the course of nine taped interviews, half a dozen over-the-phone conversations, and scores of off-the-cuff, unanticipated interactions

with Choctaw people from all over the United States, is that absolutely every one of them is a storyteller and absolute none of them claims to be. Indians are, in fact, humble, and that makes it difficult to find any who are willing to overlook the perceived vanity of sitting down in front of a camera as a representative storyteller. Fortunately, I had some takers.

Oklahoma

I felt very confident, hurtling across the Red River, that we were doing something that had rarely been tried and much less often been accomplished: we were making a movie in Oklahoma.

The state of Oklahoma wallows in the no-man's-land of modern America. The term "flyover state," a (let's face it) pejorative that has emerged to describe one half of the "Two Americas coastal-interior model," perfectly captures both its geographic location and its presence in the average American's mental map of their country. Oklahoma is the great anomaly of the 150 year long process that unfolded as state-by-state the Union grew larger. It achieved statehood status in 1907; all of its immediate neighbors, with the exception of barely-adjacent New Mexico, were designated as such before the outbreak of the Civil War.

The reasons behind this, of course, intersect profoundly with the very same histories that I've been exploring in this project. Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory lay beyond the pale of federal attention, and in many ways federal authority, for decades after their initial institution. The lore and Americana that define and

identify other states never got a firm rooting in Oklahoma until arguably the hardest moment in the history of rural America, the Dust Bowl. As stark black-and-white images flowed out at equal pace with Okie refugees, the general public saw abject poverty collide with monumental natural catastrophe. Culprits were named: poor farming practices, which translates to the casual newspaper reader as a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, and bad weather, the ultimate sign of being unlucky and forsaken. Then came the musical, even the briefest mention of which is probably sufficient to stir up that familiar melody in your head, *"Oooooo-klahoma, where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain…"* And so, as Oklahoma goes, we know of Steinbeck's rag-tag Joad family, Bill Paxton in *Twister*, a remarkably successful college football team, a state so red that Trump carried every county in 2016 and then asked native son Toby Keith to ring in the inauguration, and, finally, the vague, collaged image of what many people only ever see "in real life" on the side of Redskins helmets and in front of convenient stores at which tobacco is sold, The Indian.

Everything that I just mentioned forms Oklahoma's portrait as seen by the outside observer. A little extra digging reveals data that suggests that the state is stuck in the backwaters across various axes of measurement: 8th highest in adult obesity rankings, 3rd lowest in public education (incorporating various success measures, education equity, and spending per student), 9th lowest in median income, etc. Just look at the motives behind President Obama's three trips to the state during his time in office: firstly to discuss the Keystone XL Pipeline's expedited southern construction schedule, second to comfort and mourn with victims of a deadly tornado outbreak, and

finally to highlight prison reform goals with an address at El Reno Federal Correctional Facility. Oil, tornadoes, and felony crime. Not exactly a pleasant picture of a thriving, forward-looking place.

There has long been a joke that I've heard in history classrooms throughout my time in Texas public schools that the choice of Oklahoma by Jackson's federal government as the destination for Indian removal was deliberate, of the adding-insult-to-injury variety. To quote my high school U.S. History teacher, "sending the Southeastern tribes to Oklahoma was a fate worse than death." It should be noted that he was a rabid fan of Texas Longhorn athletics and a born-and-raised Texan who will likely be buried with the Lone Star flag. Perhaps state rivalry motivated him in that statement, but even if no one outside of Texas holds that sentiment as strongly, it undoubtedly exists, somewhere at the intersection of legend, joke, and historical fact.

I will stop for a moment to give Oklahoma time to catch its breath in its corner of the ring. I am an Oklahoman by birth. It is for that reason that I have listened keenly and thought long and hard about what it means to come from a state that society deems to be mostly a black hole. Like a little cousin, I view my birthplace with a mixture of pride and down-looking judgment. If someone else pokes fun, I will intervene with a defense, but I reserve the right forever to talk about Oklahoma, warts and all, with the type of loving condescension that is only reserved for insiders.

All this is to say, Hollywood does not often shine its light anywhere near Muskogee, Atoka, Durant, or Talihina. These are exactly the places the crew and I visited. If I worked for the tourist office (if the state government even maintains one,

since they currently epitomize the limited government paradox, a self-dismantling entity that always strives to make its citizens, who experience dismal levels of economic mobility and high rates of amphetamine addiction, "more free"), perhaps I would have sought out the most pristine and impressive views that might evangelize the wonders of an Oklahoma adventure. But documentaries and commercials being fundamentally different media, we preferred showing what was real over showing anything else. One could still make a strong case that we happened to capture Oklahoma's good side by accident; the southeastern corner is widely agreed to have the most beautiful scenery in the state. A common description offered by people who have traveled in that region describes southeastern Oklahoma as the exception that proves the rule of the state's lackluster natural landscape: "It doesn't feel like Oklahoma." This geographical disparity is not only a matter of interest but also of historical importance; the U.S. government used it as a reward. The Five Civilized Tribes were not the only Native peoples displaced to Oklahoma, but they received the choicest land in exchange for their relative "cooperation." Of course, even the term "Civilized Tribes" contains information about the prejudices of one of the parties to the negotiations, and they did not always go according to plan. The Seminole, Cherokee, and Creek proved to be more of a thorn in Jackson's side than he might have anticipated. The Choctaw and Chickasaw, tucked in behind many miles of buffer land that lay between them and their actively engaged eastern brethren, more readily "accepted" the stipulations provided by the U.S. government. The question follows naturally: Why accept the terms of what would go on

to be the most painful chapter in the history of your people? It seems a shame that the Choctaw were so willing to go gently into the night.

This is, of course, false. The choice was clearly not very much of one. Some tribal leaders, including the illustrious Pushmataha, sought the diplomatic route, motivated by dread of the inevitable clash with European-American society and a desire to preempt the damage control that would be necessary should a violent conflict arise. More militant elements, especially the tribes of the Ohio River Valley, vocally discouraged Indian leaders from the deals peddled by the U.S. government, sensing something amiss in the fine print. The Indian negotiators recognized a party across the table that was unbeholden to the treaties they had broken repeatedly with northeastern tribes, which by this point had all but been subsumed by the grasping adolescent Republic. In hindsight, we know what the local chiefs could not have possibly known in the day, that every strategy, violent or otherwise, would prove to be futile. So Pushmataha, the greatest of all Choctaw chiefs, in pursuing a deal with the U.S. government, looks like a Native American predecessor to Neville Chamberlain. The plaque that commemorates him at the Choctaw Capitol grounds in Tuskahoma, Oklahoma, even has a difficult time teasing out the complexities of praising a man who unknowingly cracked open Pandora's Box with his diplomatic trip to Washington, D.C. He never returned from that journey, dying the day before Christmas, 1824. I'm greatly struck by the symbolism there.

Arriving in Durant midday on Friday, March 31, we knocked on the door of the tribal chaplain's office to officially break ground on our movie. After holding up a finger

to indicate he needed just a second to finish typing something (he click-clacked away, using only the pointer finger on each hand), he swiveled around in an ergonomic office chair and greeted us with a warm smile. Halito! Introductions to the four-person crew out of the way, we set up and began our conversation, periodically interrupted for brief spurts by a loud and determined overhead air vent. Olin Williams is a 65 years old, and he will tell you that no less than three times when you meet with him. I first sat across from him about eight months ago, ten miles down the road. When I emailed asking if he could recommend a place for us to discuss the project, his response, in all lowercase letters, surely rendered with his classic two-finger technique, was “at the burger king across from the casino.”

Now we were in his office, much better kept and more tastefully decorated than the highway-side Burger King, and he was mic'd up, giving his two cents on topics ranging from stickball gender politics to Indian filmmakers. Olin is a Mississippi Choctaw working for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Because of the decentralized nature of the tribe, very few people have as thorough of an understanding of both major contemporary Choctaw subgroups as Olin does. We asked him to deliver part of one of the stories he tells in the Chahta language, and he demured. “They wouldn’t want me to. They don’t want me to speak, ‘cause I speak it different.” I press for more details about who “they” are and what “different” means in this context, to which he replies that Mississippi Choctaws and Oklahoma Choctaws speak distinct dialects and the language department in Oklahoma has expressed to him that his accent, speed, and lexicon don’t always fit the party line.

In the three substantial interactions I've had with Olin, he's always proudly declared himself a straight-shooter, and I began to agree approximately two minutes into our first conversation when he told me that, he was "old" and that he didn't "care what people [thought] of [him] anymore." He tells it like it is, and very often, that means he communicates in short, clipped responses. These also happen to be the hardest modes of speech to edit around in a documentary film. A technique that I often used when talking to Olin, one that I had picked up from my documentary professor Shelby Hadden, was that of strategic silence. The idea is that the interviewee feels more strongly about a topic than they let on, and the best way to uncover those feelings is to allow silence to hang in the room until they choose to break it. They will simply answer your questions if you give them an out (i.e. asking another question), but they will also strive to avoid awkward pauses. It is an instinct to fill heavy silence with speech, and although the mechanics of filmmaking allow for the avoidance of any silence at all (or the deliberate use of as much as possible, by the same token), oftentimes the interview subject will fail to realize that. When they are offered silence, they will naturally search for further elaboration, and usually the response they give here reflects how they truly feel. These are the good bits, the juicy details, the no-holds-barred confessions. From experience, their first statements after silence are often previewed by disclaimers like "now I don't mean to offend anyone" or "don't take this the wrong." I always assure the speaker afterwards that they are not offending anyone. In fact, they are making the crew and me quite happy indeed.

Wrapping up with Olin, we headed over towards the aforementioned Burger King, which lies in the shadow of the gleaming and massive casino complex that is advertised all over Oklahoma and Texas as the ideal venue for watching edgy comics and Barry Manilow. Tucked in behind the Burger King sits a small portable building, completely nondescript from the outside except for a Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma flag on a 15 foot flagpole in front. This building houses the Historical and Cultural Preservation Departments. Inside, oppressive fluorescents and stacks of untidy paper files give the whole thing a very *Office Space* feel. Ryan Spring looks up at us from his desk.

Ryan apologizes for not being able to give us his undivided attention; he is about to send an email about something very important. The loan officer who is overseeing his and his wife's paperwork to get a mortgage for a new house has informed him that his wife's bad credit will make her a liability on their application. His professional recommendation would be to apply with only Ryan's name listed. Ryan fires off his return email, in which he schools the loan officer on Choctaw matrilineal tradition that places the woman in charge as the keeper of the household. He tells us that it would be disrespectful in a way that is hard for the officer to understand if he were to go forward with the application without his wife as a cosignatory, at the very least. He asks if they can include her name, but not run her credit, and then presses send before he stands up and shakes our hands.

Mr. Spring is currently working for the tribe by day and finishing a master's degree in Native American Leadership by night. He leads us on a miniature tour of the

collection of display artifacts, not miniature as in abridged, but miniature because that is all that is available for viewing. After background information about hand-woven baskets, pottery, dresses, and stickball, we sit down for a more detailed conversation about Ryan and his relationship to stories. I asked Ryan at the end of our conversation if he had done anything like this before, and he explained that he had appeared in a few things produced by the media department. I could tell. He spoke with a natural ease and eloquence that made clear he had spent time thinking about these issues long before we'd asked him to share his thoughts with us. He emphasized several times what he hopes the future of his department holds. On the subject of the Cultural Center, which would completely change the trajectory of the Cultural Services team in Durant, he outlined the importance of "immersion" in any education environment, whether it be students at an Elementary School or road-trip travelers stopping by at a gleaming Cultural Center. If new technologies offer opportunities for engagement and lower the barriers to entry for the average person with no background in Choctaw culture, then by all means they have a place in the concept designs for the Center, he confirmed. Reflecting on the volume of calls his office receives requesting research and genealogical information, Ryan expressed to us his desire to see any new facilities be home to a consolidated system and library wherein that work can be done, as well.

Ryan's workday ends around five o'clock each day. When we finished up with him, it was 7:30 and the rest of the building was dark and empty. He locked up behind us as we thanked him and wished him farewell. Then he told us about the stickball. The next morning Ryan and his teammates would be traveling north to Muskogee to play in

a Round Robin stickball tournament at Bacone College. When we admitted to him that we had nothing set on the calendar for Saturday, he invited us to come up and shoot some of the tournament, which he promised would be “fast and rough.” That got us onboard.

About an hour up the road from Durant in Allen, Oklahoma we rolled into my grandparent’s house after my grandma’s bedtime. She greeted us at the door and welcomed the crew inside, past the entryway rooms where I spent hours of my childhood playing with new Christmas presents, and towards the waiting spaghetti dinner in the kitchen. Over the meal, we described to her and my grandpa our first day of shooting. My nana seemed thrilled, probably because it felt like the first fruits of her labor. It is thanks to her that I even got a start on this project. Her late father had taken a keen interest during his life in his Native American heritage, and so it is because of him and through her that I am aware of our family roots in the Choctaw tribe. Throughout the process, she has been an enthusiastic and tireless research assistant, network coordinator, and travel companion. I guess if I had to give any advice to someone doing a project like this in the future, it would be to have a grandmother like mine. They hosted us wonderful, listened to our stories, gave us directions for the next day, and sent us off in the morning full from breakfast and each with a styrofoam cup of coffee. Executive producers.

Stickball is the fast, loud, and violent older cousin of modern lacrosse. It has been played for hundreds of years by Choctaws and other southeastern tribes, as well as famously by Native Americans in the Northeast, although each tribe in practice plays

slight variations of the same general game. Choctaws in Mississippi have been playing the sport uninterrupted for generations. It has only recently, in the last fifteen years or so, begun its renaissance in Oklahoma. And it is growing. Official rules and regulations have been codified, permanent fields have been built (the game used to be, and still often is, played on converted American football fields), and youth participation expands every year. Traditional dancing, basket weaving, pottery, even storytelling, survive today mostly in the limited realm of yearly events and occasional festivals. Not so for stickball. In the sports-crazy state, I believe that stickball will be the most visible ongoing example of cultural upkeep.

The relationship between war and sports is asserted throughout scholarship, and has had an obvious and sometimes explicit presence in the Western world. Choctaws call stickball "The Little Brother of War," so there's no room for debate there about whether or not the similarities were intentional. It was this violence, literally this "savagery," that caused the sport to be legally banned in southern states into the 1970s. That will not happen again. There is a rhythm and a sensation about the game, a fluid creativity and originality, that suggest to me that it will be the most stable and organic vehicle for Choctaw tradition, and even stories, into the future. Choctaws may have to fight to protect their language, their dress, their food, and their identity from disappearing. Ironically, stickball, a game born out of fighting, will probably not have to be fought for at all. It is alive and well, and it speaks for itself.

Our final shots of the trip were the landscapes that Dylan had come for. Driving south from Muskogee, we criss-crossed through the lush, green corner of a mostly

yellow state, and wound our way up rolling hills and exposed rocky outcroppings towards Lake Sardis. This man-made flood control lake is the closest body of water to the Choctaw Capitol grounds in Tuskahoma. We entered the camping area without paying, explaining to the ticketing woman that we were just looking around when in fact it was the cameras who would be doing the most important looking. A time lapse and some beautiful shots of the lake later, we had finished with the first weekend of shooting.

Louisiana

Documentary films live inside coffee cups. No matter the subject, no matter the length, creating a movie like this requires endurance and patience. It follows that the hardest part, the biggest hurdle, is not the beginning, nor is it the final stretch, but the long and winding middle when doubt creeps in and starts to metastasize. The word "passion" has lost its meaning in a sea of buzzwords, but it is truly the only way to describe the last drops of fuel left in the tank after months of thinking about the same problems and running into dead-ends.

The six hour drive from Austin to Leesville, Louisiana, left my eyes sore and my legs stiff. Night fell in the country. People went to bed and the insects woke up. The road stretched out in front of us, narrow and empty, and I felt for what must have been four hours that we had to be down to having one hour left. Only one day of our production schedule required us to drive without rewarding us with any new footage, and that happened to come at the end of a week full of challenges: Dylan got the flu and recused

himself before Mary and I had to tell him that we weren't about to take a sick person on a 21-hour road trip; my cold call to the Philadelphia office where the historical preservation department is located ended with a suggestion that I fill out a media request form and wait the six weeks it would take to process (we would be shooting there in three days); a new sound person to fill in for Maxson quoted Mary too much money for three days of work (we ended up telling him "thanks but no thanks," and Mary stepped up to run sound over weekend two). Although I certainly could not have predicted these issues exactly, I had a hunch that problems would arise just as problems always do when your stated goal is to make a film with four students for no money in the-middle-of-nowhere Mississippi with no guaranteed interviews on the docket.

My experience has always been that obstacles and victories, in a long-scaled average, come around in equal proportions. And so we found a replacement DP, Farzan, with whom both Mary and I had experience and a few years of friendship, and suddenly everything flipped a second time from "looking impossible" to "looking probable, actually."

In 1995, the federal government extended official recognition to a group of a few hundred Choctaws in and around the tiny town of Jena, Louisiana, and the Jena Band of Choctaw stepped into the light for the first time. On Friday afternoon, the crew and I, now numbering three (minus a sound person, you'll recall), came literally knocking at their door, locked because the building closes at five and the receptionist does not often receive guests at 4:52. We explained our project and our presence in front of her, and she displayed the typical and understandable skepticism that had by now become

expected for me when dealing with employees of the tribe. She hurried out from behind her desk towards a door, requesting that we stay put while she passed us along to the next person in the pecking order. In the end, we felt neither welcome nor unwelcome, but somewhere precisely in the middle, which we interpreted loosely to mean we could set up for an interview *outside* as a sort of compromise. Five minutes later, our participant arrived.

I didn't see Mindy Goodman's eyes for the first twenty minutes after we met. She was wearing large sunglasses, and the sun had settled down at just the right angle to make them very useful. She's twenty four years old, one of the bluntest people I've ever met, and she's fiercely and vocally proud to be a Choctaw. She apologized the first time she said "bullshit" in our interview, but not the second time of any of the other times after that. Throughout our conversation, she referenced a dozen other people, all of whom she was related to in one way or another. By her estimation, the entire Jena Band is made up of cousins, either first or distant. Our interview ran the gamut: subtle criticisms of what she sees as complacency and business-centric policies in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, a description of grimy Shreveport, a look into her family life when we got the chance to meet her four children (3, 6, and two adopted kids who are older), and a discussion of the paradoxes of life in the small town South as a Native American woman with a conservative religious background.

When it came to stories and storytelling, Mindy struck out in various directions, some of which were complementary and others which contradicted themselves. She believes strongly that language fluency is the conduit for cultural preservation, so she

supports a focus on telling and teaching stories if it will be valuable to a pursuit of language acquisition. But she cautioned reading too far into them. “At the end of the day,” she said, “they’re just stories. I don’t believe them too much.”

Mississippi

It’s fitting that Vicksburg served as our point-of-entry into the state of Mississippi. All of the city’s complexities, its beauty, its difficult history, seem to echo and reify the identity of the state that holds it in the deepest depths of the American South. Driving next to the military cemetery and battlefield site, today a National Park, there an unmistakable sense of the weight of the past hanging over the town. Pride and shame walk hand-and-hand over cobblestone streets downtown. We spent the night at a Hampton Inn and Suites that was flanked on the outside by replica Civil War-era cannons, and even the crown-molding and white columns, obviously built cheaply in the last ten years, harkened to a the bygone era when Vicksburg was the jewel of the Mississippi River. Morning came and we left, driving noticeably faster, I think, because we sensed that our destination was finally within reach. Our furthest point on the trip, where we would end the outbound leg, coincidentally fell at the place where the journey for the Choctaw began: Nanih Waiya, the sacred mound.

No analogy presents itself to me to use in describing Nanih Waiya’s significance to the tribe. It is certainly no pilgrimage site; the dilapidated visitor’s center has had its windows blown out for at least ten years, and no gatekeeper oversees the quiet property. In fact, the road sign that formerly pointed out to drivers what they were breezing past is

now propped up against the pole that used to hold it, slowly surrendering to the rain and sun that will one day erase the writing. A low chain link fence forms the boundary between surrounding farms and the land on which the mound is situated, officially in the hands of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians since 2008. I expected hubbub, perhaps a ticketing window, a parking lot, an audio tour. No, Nanih Waiya is far from an industry, like other landmarks in the area and around the country. The Nanih Waiya we found on the trip exists as two entities: Nanih-Waiya-The-Mound and Nanih-Waiya-The-Idea. As the birthplace of the Choctaw people, it represents Nation, Identity, and Origin. The non-Mississippian Choctaws we interviewed had never visited. But they referred to it like one refers to home.

The story is different depending on whom you ask. (If you are reading along and find yourself looking for an excerpt to summarize this Thesis Report, the previous sentence would be a great one.) All of the versions we heard shared a few basic details. Choctaws were formed in a cave by The Creator out of clay. They came out onto a hill, called Nanih Waiya, where they laid in the sunlight until they dried. This is the birth of the Choctaw people. Variations involve its combination with another story which mentions the origin of the others of The Five Civilized Tribes, and their subsequent departure for distant lands. In that version, which sees the Muskogee, the Cherokee, the Chickasaw all head off for the horizon, he Choctaw, the youngest, choose to stay by their place of creation. Another “migration story” tells of two brothers who were being led by a guide with a sacred staff. Every night, the guide would place the staff down into mud so that it stood up straight, and in the middle of the night The Creator would move it so

that it leaned in a certain direction. The next morning the guide would take note of the direction and continue leading the people that way. One day, the staff stayed straight up all through the night, and the place it marked as the home of the Choctaw was Nanih Waiya.

Back to the creation story with the clay. When we talked to Mindy in Mississippi, she mentioned that the version that her grandmother told her as a girl further specified that the clay figures that were originally molded were crayfish, and that when they laid on the hill, their hard shells cracked open and the Choctaw people emerged from them. She acknowledged that this was a Louisiana spin on the tale. And that is perhaps the most intriguing part of all of this. Every subgrouping, family, individual tells these stories with a small degree of discrepancy. Their forms, their templates, survive generation to generation, but they evolve when they are displaced over time and space.

The green of the grass at Nanih Waiya was so green, and the sky at Nanih Waiya was so blue. When we had gotten enough for the cameras, we turned them off and spent some time in silence, contemplating. When we had gotten enough contemplation, we packed up the cameras and left.

Our next stop, and the last of the trip, took us to a school called Red Water Elementary in Carthage, about 40 miles away in the direction of Austin. Through a language instructor in Oklahoma named Nicholas Charleston, I had been put in touch with an Oklahoma Choctaw who was raised in Los Angeles named Jason Brightstar Lewis. In his early 20s, searching for direction in his life, Jason relocated to the reservation in Mississippi. He had majored in Native American Studies in college and

participated in indigenous activism, but he did not speak the language nor did he feel in touch with the culture that his family had mostly chosen to leave behind. When I messaged back and forth with him on Facebook about conducting an interview at a tribal school, I pictured in my head an old building, the kind that had seen better days. Red Water Elementary might be the nicest building in the county.

The school opened in 2014 and came equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and learning engagement technology. Part of what I set out to explore in this project was the impact that emerging media is having on preserving and perpetuating cultural traditions. Seeing the Chahta language being written on smart whiteboards went a long way towards providing part of the answer to that question. We would learn later in the interviews that teachers at the school have introduced 30-minute chunks in the day that offer students opportunities for full Chahta immersion. Sitting in the library with a half dozen of the strongest proponents and practitioners of Chahta language pedagogy today, I could sense how much this meant to them as they gushed about growing programs and witnessing a revitalization of the language. “Language is the key to culture,” Nick Charleston had said to me on the phone from Durant, Oklahoma in January. Here in Mississippi, I could see what he meant.

We talked to Jason and two women named Abriana and Courtney, each of whom teaches language as well as other subjects both at the school and in spin-off programmed events. Before the interviews, we sat in on one of these immersion events led by another person we got the chance to talk to, a teacher named Pandora Dixon-Sockey. She explained to us that the goal that afternoon was to provide parents

with tips and tools for incorporating full language immersion at home. Now that the tribe has identified language teaching as a primary goal and necessary step forward in ensuring that the culture survives throughout its "Seven Generation Plan," teachers like Pandora are challenging the system to push beyond the small advancements that have recently been made. She wants to see full immersion schools, where every subject is taught in Chahta and students become comfortable conversing in the language when they are as young as possible. The absence of this approach has been linked to the rapid loss of the language in the past few generations. That's a trend that Pandora and her husband Rod are eager to reverse.

As the last families finished their meals in the cafeteria, the teachers locked up the gym, shut off the lights in the library, and closed the doors behind us as we shuffled towards the car with our arms full of equipment. An hour later along the side of the highway in the Natchez National Historical Park, Farzan pushed the camera along a metal slider to get one last shot of the sun going down behind the trees. I yelled cut, we tore down the equipment, packed up, and drove off into the dusk, leaving behind chirping crickets and little tripod footprints. We had wrapped.

Part III: The product

From concept to production

The great challenge and joy of working on a documentary is the process of feeling around in the dark looking for your story. My respect for documentary filmmakers has never been more profound than it is now that I am coming off my own experience

working on one. My film involved managing a small crew, maximizing a tiny budget, and working towards the goal of completing a thesis. A professional juggles the added stresses of finding an audience, connecting with it, and trying to make enough money to recoup what she convinced investors to put forward. For this reason, plus the long hours, the travel, the technological frustrations, and a scheduling process that feels like shooting at a moving target, a film will live or die on the strength of the connection between the filmmaker and the idea. This idea must be a powerful thing or it will never be able to propel the person with the vision over the constant stream of obstacles that he will face.

For me, that idea was as follows: “As a filmmaker, I am a storyteller. I belong to a group of people, the Choctaw, who have been telling stories for hundreds, even thousands, of years. How are these two concepts related?”

That proved to be enough of an initial jump-start to launch me on a research field trip, a visit to the Capitol grounds of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in Tuskahoma, OK, during the annual Green Corn Festival. That event yielded contacts, new avenues of research to explore, a testing ground for the footage we would later shoot of stickball players engaged in their high-speed sport, as well as a sense of the natural beauty of the surroundings that would end up forming the backbone of the landscape photography featured in the final film.

In the months between the festival, which took place the weekend before Labor Day, and the rolling of our cameras for the first time, several things stood between my idea and the beginning of production. First of all, I needed a team. I reasoned that this

project could not be a lone-wolf venture; more than two hands would be required to achieve the look I wanted and also keep the interview participants in good spirits. However, the low-budget nature of the film (our shooting budget wound up being around $2,000) necessitated that we keep things small and manageable. I looked to first lock down a producer.

A producer is the principle crew member responsible for organizing the logistical execution of a project. She ensures that a film gets realized to its full potential with the most efficient use of available resources. She can make or break a film, and if you aren't able to find one that you can trust, it's entirely plausible that you will have no film at all. I've worked with a handful of producers during my time at film school, and the good ones tend to be people you go to great lengths to keep around. In this project, I knew that I wanted to work with Mary Adams, a friend of mine and someone I had worked closely with before. I found out from someone who had taken a producing class with her that she had pitched a project in that class that involved traveling around the country to shoot small sections for a larger documentary. If she had gone through the process of planning pre-production on something like that, I felt that she would be the perfect fit for this project. I asked her about her interest, and she responded enthusiastically. A very important piece had now fallen into place.

My next concern was in the camera department. On larger-scale projects, a Director of Photography leads the team that creates the visual look of the film while a camera operator physically handles the camera itself. In the context of this project, I looked to roll those two positions into one. I ran into Dylan Tidmore on the street in the

first of what would be many weird coincidences involving him and this project. After catching up, he explained to me that he was in his final semester at UT. He was looking for something to work on while he waited for the summer, during which he would be traveling to Ecuador to start a project with an indigenous community there. He had been inspired to make that film by a class he had taken the semester before about Native American representation on screen. I had also been keeping tabs on him on Instagram, where he had recently posted a flurry of stunning landscapes and time lapse shorts. I told him that I had the perfect project for him.

Mary began to reach out through her network in search of our final crew member, a production sound person. While Dylan focused on the camera set-up, Mary planned the trip, and I made creative choices about the style and tone of the piece, we would need someone solely devoted to the undersung hero of film: sound. Good sound is hard to come by, especially in the world of student film, and likewise for the people who make it their focus. We dipped into the budget and paid our sound person for his time and the use of his equipment. And with that, our car was full.

We organized our pre-production materials in a Google Drive folder. Mary created a line-item budget, after which it became pretty clear that our quest to receive funding for the film would need to be approached from several directions at once. I applied for a Plan II Thesis Grant and received $700 to be put towards travel expenses and food for the crew. That grant allowed us to begin planning and making travel reservations, but we still lacked money to allocate towards equipment rental. Over the course of the two weekends, the team used a rental house called “MPS Camera and

Lighting," based out of the warehouses by Austin Studios. As with anything, you learn as you go. We discovered ways to cut costs (leaving out unnecessary equipment, asking about student discounts, etc.), which wound up halving the bill between weekends one and two. So for $2000, we could make this movie.

How did we go about making that final fundraising push? The ol' necessary evil of student film financing: crowdfunding. There are many ways to conduct crowdfunding campaigns. Some strategies work consistently, some depend on the timing and target audience, and others belong to the category of "avoid at all costs." We wanted to very consciously stand out from the bevy of GoFundMe frequent flyers on everyone's Facebook feeds, the ones constantly losing cameras in Europe or breaking their ankles at South Padre. I made up my mind to avoid the common pitfalls of those campaigns - no stakes, no commitments, and no tangible results - and instead shoot for simplicity and the ability of the average viewer to create a mental image of what success would look like. We filmed a promotional video in a studio at the Communications buildings in which I delivered a pitch, looking straight into the camera, while behind me flashed stereotypical images of silver screen Native Americans. Being realistic, you know that the campaign must be legitimate enough to encourage your family to donate, flashy enough to potentially inspire a few friends, and small enough to feel reasonable and achievable to every person who clicks the link. I think we hit those marks on our way to articulating a clear vision, and the flow of funds followed suit. You can take a look at the campaign page here:

https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/from-the-water-to-the-woods-the-choctaw-story#/.

One big takeaway from the planning phase: phone calls, Facebook messages, even Skype chats do not properly substitute for connecting with someone in person. Many of our contacts inconsistently responded to email, so telephone became my primary method of getting in touch with them to schedule interviews. Cold calling hurts. It takes a lot to muster the energy to push on when every at-bat ends with a strikeout. Once I finally found somebody willing to lend an ear, the real work began. I explained my project in detail and talked about my reasons for embarking on it. Then I tried to respectfully convince the person on the other end of the line to take part in it for no monetary compensation and only a fuzzy promise of what the finished film would be (remember, at this point, you really have no way of knowing what the final product is going to look like). The tone and subject of your piece greatly impact your odds of success in recruitment. If your project highlights a topic already steeped in showmanship, then filling out your "cast," so to speak, should be no problem at all. For example, a basketball player desperate for name recognition of any kind will love the free publicity that your film provides him. He is scratching your back; you are scratching his. Not so when the topic at hand involves a nearly-extinct cultural tradition that has been exploitatively handled by white men with cameras.

I ultimately established a network through a hub-and-spoke approach. The man at the center of it all was Olin Williams, the tribal chaplain mentioned in the "Oklahoma" section above. He introduced me to language instructors and friends

through whom I met essentially all the people that would end up in the film. Even into the final day of shooting, I was meeting people for the first time that would go on to be my most fascinating participants.

Dylan and I met up to share influences and reference pieces. He showed me a film about Native American skateboarders that links their relationship to their boards and their Plains forefathers' relationship to the horse. I played for him a short film called *Isabelle's Garden* about the poverty Oklahoma Indians face in their daily lives. I think it captures the natural environment in a compelling way, and I wanted us to expand on that for much of our B-Roll footage (so named because it traditionally was shot on the second of two rolls in the old load-and-shoot film days. It tends to be seen as "filler" with a more flexible final use than the main footage, conventionally shot on the A roll). We discussed what kind of equipment could give us the look we wanted, made a list, and then packed our bags. Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, and a documentary film awaited.

Post-production

Ernest Hemingway famously advised to "Write drunk, edit sober." Although you shouldn't drink while shooting a documentary, sometimes the unpredictability and chaos of it all leaves you feeling as though you are. The lack of clarity, the feeling of not being in control, is shared between both experiences. But level heads must sweep in and do some heavy lifting before anything can be published or distributed to the outside world. Thus, the all-important editing room is no place for adult beverages.

I chose to edit this project with the non-linear editing software AVID, which is generally taken to be the industry standard (though Premiere and Final Cut advocates like to shout that loudly whenever they can). AVID's history began with the marriage of computer programming expertise and linear editing conventions. A steep learning curve and less-than-flashy user interface scare many people away, but underneath the intimidating veneer is a degree of specificity not provided by more intuitive programs. The majority of my workflow in editing actually occurs before anything is ever thrown on a timeline (a "timeline" being the place where clips and tracks of various media - audio, video, effects, etc. - are assembled together into a single piece of media).

A rule-of-thumb in doc world is "an hour for a minute," which suggests that every minute of the final product should be sourced from an hour of raw footage. This 60:1 ratio means that the cameras have a lot of capturing to do, and also that careful organization is a must. As large raw files pile up on SD cards, a person called a "D.I.T." transfers them to hard drives in a systematic fashion that makes them easy to locate and access in the editing room. I've heard this D.I.T. job described as "data wrangling." If everything has gone according to plan on the front end, you've actually start editing all the way back in this stage of the project, or at least laying the foundation for your edit. AVID encourages and supports complicated, specialized media management. When all the raw media has been imported into various folders and "bins" (places to store and sort files), you are ready to begin looking for the gold that will be ultimately placed on your timeline. One of the common pitfalls of documentary, and of student docs in particular (see above), is the difficulty of capturing quality sound. The run-and-gun

approach sometimes limits the abilities of the crew to control mic placement and the environment. DSLR cameras have onboard mics, but those are really the bare bones when it comes to capturing the environment with high fidelity. An external mic solves this problem, but creates a new one: syncing. When sound and picture exist on separate tracks, it can derail the desired effect if they are even a fraction of a second out-of-sync. Clapping a slate is the conventional way around this problem; it's why the slate has emerged as a recognizable symbol of moviemaking. One object both labels each shot and allows for quality syncing in post-production. Of course, we couldn't do the easy or conventional thing. That would have been too easy and conventional. If a slate isn't available, as it wasn't on our set, a pair of hands will do. Clapping your hands as soon as both the camera and recorder are "speeding" (recording) will do just fine in a pinch. This whole film was made in a pinch.

With all the files sorted and synced, I proceeded with "sub-clipping," which is essentially the process of making smaller new files with the highlights of the raws. It is these subclips that will be dragged and dropped into your timeline later. In documentary editing, especially with interviews, subclips are often simply catchy sound bites. If an interview participant makes a profound, well-worded point, I will grab it and throw it into its own bin as a subclip for easy access later. Subclipping provides the raw materials for weaving together your story.

The end goal, of course, is to do more than just lash together all the sounds and images you got on set. Editing is the process of reimagining and recombining what you have to create something new and far more evocative. Directing the documentary

already consists of curating the world around you into only the most consumable and interesting bits, but editing is the more refined cousin of the same job. Now it is about teasing out what makes certain elements of your raws stick with an audience and inspire emotional response and contemplation.

With Thesis Symposium looming, I set out to make two films, really. The first was a two-minute trailer for the longer ten-minute piece, a snappier, more eye-catching, and less comprehensive version of the final film. In composing the trailer, I focused less on constructing an argument and more on whetting the viewer's appetite for one. Working alongside Jack Roberts, who composed music for this project, I tried to forget everything I knew about the footage, all the extra baggage I had gathered in the on-set environment and the months preceding it, so as to place myself in the seat of a person seeing this stuff for the first time. What images were the most powerful? What combination of media immersed me-as-viewer most effectively? There are a thousand possible iterations of the same footage, and I was trying to build one that reflected everything I had gleaned from months of research, travel, and conversations.

Conclusion

The end of the journey for a filmmaker is very rarely a chosen one, because it is hard to overcome the sense that something else could be done to further perfect your work. Million-dollar movies revv back up to full-scale production surprisingly often to reshoot simply because you can never do too much. The tinkering never stops unless it absolutely has to. It is for this reason that the industry is built upon hard deadlines.

Your commitment to yourself is to make the best possible film; your commitment to everyone else is to finish something and share it with them.

One of the great ironies of working on something for so long is that you grow out of being who you were when you started. An undertaking like making a research documentary, or really conducting any kind of undergraduate research, shapes and molds you as a thinker and a creator in ways that almost make you want to start all over again with the new skills and wisdom that you have acquired along the way. If I could set out to do this again, there are a hundred thousand things I would do differently. I would start reaching out to people earlier. I would watch fifty more movies than I did. I would stack the pile of books twice as high. I would go into office hours at every opportunity. And the list goes on and on.

I plan to expand this project one day to encompass more stories and more research than I've been able to gather during this school year. Several books that compile and celebrate Choctaw stories have been published in the last twenty years, but there has yet to be a methodical visual media approach to preserving these stories for future generations. In setting out to do just that, I recognize that a perfectly comprehensive and exhaustive record is not an achievable goal. Stories in the oral tradition will be lost to time, just as language will naturally evolve, and customs will fade in and out of relevancy. Culture, like anything left to humans and time, is undergoing a constant process of change. But Choctaw people deserve to be heard, and they deserve the chance to teach their children and their grandchildren about the stories of the blood running through their veins. Generations from now, this tradition will be alive and well

only if Choctaws are provided with opportunities to assert their identity. It is my hope that those that follow will be able to join the Choctaws of today in proudly declaring, “I am Choctaw.”

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Appendix

Standardized Interview Questions

1. State your name, age, and affiliation to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.
2. What are some actions that the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma can take to ensure that these stories survive in the future? Would you support an initiative to compile stories, and if so, what form should that take (Written collection? Digital archive? "Storytelling academy" or "storytelling commission"? Etc.)?
3. Do you know any Choctaw storytellers?
4. Do you know any young Choctaw people with an interest in stories?
5. The Choctaw Nation is in the process of constructing a Cultural Center. What do you hope to see included in the Center's curated material?
6. How do you think non-Choctaw Native Americans view the Choctaw people? What about non-Native Americans? Are those perceptions accurate from your point of view?
7. What are your thoughts on past and present media representations of Native Americans?
8. Describe your involvement with the tribe throughout your life.
9. Do you speak Chahta? Fluently? At home? When did you learn the language?
10. Do you know any traditional Choctaw stories? If yes, when did you first hear this story (these stories)? In what language was it (were they) first told to you?
11. What are your most vivid memories involving these stories? Are these memories mostly limited to your childhood, or have these stories played some kind of recurring role in your life?
12. What was your initial reaction to the story? What do you think of the story now?
13. Have you told anyone else this story? Have you heard multiple people tell it? Have you witnessed/applied any changes to how the story is delivered?

Biography

Logan Crossley moved to Austin, Texas, in 2013 to pursue a degree in Plan II Honors at the University of Texas. Along the way, he added majors in Spanish and Radio/Television/Film, and set his sights on a career in the film industry. He also studied abroad in Spain and Cuba, wrote and directed short films, acted in and directed stage plays, cringed as his taste in music became increasingly similar to that of other Millenials, and produced exactly one MVP performance in the final game of his final season of intramural softball. He is the oldest child in his family and strongly identifies with this fact. Next year he will be working with a documentary filmmaker in Austin, where he hopes to continue to bring stories to life on the screen. When he's not focusing on films, he can be found solving crossword puzzles, imagining life as a hacktivist, and cheering avidly for Manchester City Football Club.